

DOUBLE SPEAK

TOASTING MORALITY

BY EDWARD HERMAN

IT WAS revealing to watch Jim Lehrer interview Elliott Abrams and Gary Hart in close succession in mid-December. With the latter, Lehrer is tough, asks hard (though not very intelligent) questions, and raises the issue of "morality." With Abrams, Lehrer is soft, asks no hard questions, and raises no queries about "morality." Lehrer genuflects, like a little Pooh-Bah, before the spokesmen of power, while assuming an aggressive stance with the lesser mortals who make occasional appearances on the MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour. One media analyst reports that when dissidents are proposed for inclusion on the News Hour, Lehrer regularly asks: "Who does he represent?" What Lehrer seeks, and the program provides, is a balance of representatives of groups sufficiently powerful that their voices must be heard in order to avoid negative feedback. That an individual might have special knowledge or represent an alternative viewpoint, which might provide unique insights, is apparently irrelevant. This is why on issues like the alleged KGB-Bulgarian plot to shoot the Pope, MacNeil-Lehrer never deviates from the party line and ends up conveying literal falsehoods.

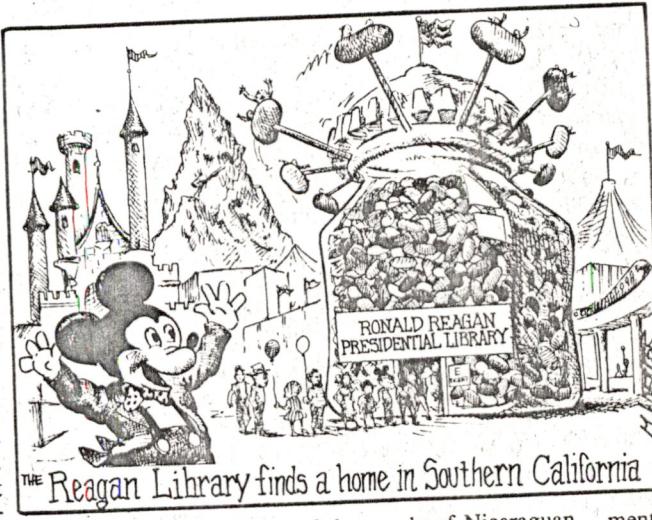
It is interesting to see how Lehrer's application of "morality" closely reflects the exigencies of power. Elliott Abrams is part of a government coterie that has engaged in multiple violations of national and international law, including the open and covert sponsorship of "terrorism" in a literal sense, involv-

ing the murder of thousands of Nicaraguan civilians. "Terrorism" is thought to be bad in the United States. Systematic violation of the law by representatives of the state is even more serious than violations by ordinary civilians, and murder is a "morality" issue enshrined in the Ten Commandments. Hart's infidelities weren't in violation of law; Abrams's were. Abrams has been caught lying so often that Democratic members of Congress were refusing to listen to him testify as a representative of the executive branch. Which man is more "immoral"?

THE BIBLICAL injunction "Thou shalt not bear false witness" should be an especially important element of "morality" for a journalist like Jim Lehrer—more so than adultery, as it bears so directly on the (theoretical) journalistic purpose of arriving at the truth. With the "official" Contragate

revelations that Abrams is a liar, you might think that Lehrer would apologize to his listeners for having brought Abrams on the program frequently in the past and for having failed to press him with serious questions. But instead, on comes Abrams again, no questions raised about "morality," and still no hard questions asked of him. A proven bearer of false witness is once again given the right to convey his opinions as pseudo facts on an alleged news program.

The press's after-the-fact justification of its focus on Hart's extra-marital affairs is their relevance to something called "character." The press has never been quite certain what element of character was revealed in the Hart escapade—Infidelity itself? A failure to keep such matters under the rug? The candidate's ability to cope with the stress of disclosure? Were Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Franklin Roosevelt shown to have had characters compatible with effective presidencies by ex post revelation of their extra-marital affairs? Does "character" possibly include honesty, humanity, independence, thoughtfulness, and possession of a system of democratic public values? We may be sure that the media did not explore these questions. "Character" is a weighty word, which obscures the media's ready gravitation to titillating aspects of continuous avoidance of substance (including serious inquiries into character). And the titillating will be covered and publicized much more aggressively in dealing with candidates disfavored by the powerful (Hart, Jackson, versus



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Dole, and Babbitt and the *Times's* favorite, the "square-jawed," "realistic," former governor of Virginia, Charles Robb.

SUPPOSE THAT the press were to focus incessantly on George Bush's toast to Ferdinand Marcos in 1981: "We love your devotion to democracy"? This would show Bush to be a liar and straightforward apologist for dictatorship. But the *New York Times* gave him front page space on August 1 for an exchange with John Linder, the brother of Ben Linder, in which Bush was portrayed as a spokesman for democracy, contending that it is our devotion to democracy that causes us to intervene in Nicaragua. No reference is made in the article to Bush's toast to Marcos, so his real record as a spokesman for "democracy" and his extraordinary hypocrisy are blacked out. James Reston explained in a December 20 column, "Hart's Latest Blunder," that with Hart "the people have already run him out of town"—Reston does not tell us how "the people's" will was expressed, but presumably it was picked by the sensitive antennae of the "voice of the people," the *New York Times* and its confreres. Bush and Dole, on the other hand, are "two experienced front-runners...leading all the Democratic candidates." No explorations of "character" for these "experienced front-runners."

These contrasting treatments illustrate how the powerful are able to influence per-

ceptions of morality and associated word usage, just as they are able to shape the distribution of government largess and the application of the law. Perceptions and word usage are determined by the ability of the powerful and their agents to fix the news agenda. Lies by the powerful tend not to be judged "newsworthy" or morally reprehensible. Lies are most likely to be focused upon with indignation when attributable to "enemies" or the weak. Soviet disinformation and alleged deceptions in adhering to arms agreements are pretty bad business and can arouse passions. Recipients of welfare are also a frequent focus of concern over lying and cheating. Consistent with the long-term interests of the powerful in keeping welfare costs down and maintaining easy (low wage) labor markets, the "criminalization of poverty" and the derogation of "welfare cheats" has a history that traces back to the Middle Ages.² As was pointed out by A. J. Liebling, "There is no concept more generally cherished by publishers than that of the Undeserving Poor...One way to rationalize the inadequacy of public aid is to blackguard the poor by saying that they have concealed assets, or bad character, or both."³ To adapt Frederic Schiller's famous lines, "The bigger the criminal and the crime, the smaller the penalty."⁴ Penalties are correlated inversely with both power and the scale of the crime. Likewise, the immorality ascribed

to criminal acts is inversely related to the power of their perpetrators, as is the selective attention and indignation bestowed by ideological institutions such as the mass media.

THESE PRINCIPLES have their most dramatic manifestation in the treatment of organizers of state violence. A man like Henry Kissinger, crushingly demonstrated to be a liar, manipulator, and major war criminal in Seymour Hersh's *The Price of Power* (among other places) is protected by the ideological institutions and serves as a highly respected consultant and commentator on public affairs on network TV. War criminals are shot when states lose wars; they remain statesmen and sought-after notables among victors (or non-losers, as the United States in Indochina). They may even receive Nobel prizes for "peace" in recognition of their role in negotiations that ended their unprovoked assault on distant countries, which had resulted in literally millions of casualties. Criminals in the provinces are similarly protected: Duarte, for example, a chronic liar and the chief public relations officer of the Salvadoran army during the Second Matanza (1980-87), who will go down in Central American history as a notorious Quisling, is presented in the U.S. press as an honest democrat, reformer and "patriot" (even if embarrassingly inclined to kiss the American flag at receptions in Washington).⁵ There are critics of Kissinger and Duarte, but they are largely outside the mainstream and not "responsible." "Responsible" may be defined as follows: "Pertaining to the form but not the substance, as in responsible criticism." Also, starting from the premise that those wielding power seek benevolent ends on the basis of superior knowledge."

Footnotes

1. See Edward S. Herman and Frank Brodhead, *The Rise and Fall of the Bulgarian Connection*, New York: Sheridan Square Press, 1986, pp. 185-89, analyzing the MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour coverage of this issue.

2. See Peter Golding and Sue Middleton, *Images of Poverty*, London, Martin Robertson, 1980.

3. *The Press*, New York: Ballantine, 1964, p. 79.

4. Schiller's words were: "It is criminal to steal a purse, daring to steal a fortune, a mark of greatness to steal a crown. The blame diminishes as the guilt increases."

5. Flunkies for American power in the provinces, like war criminals at home, are also unlikely ever to suffer for major war crimes. When their populations finally repudiate them, they will find a haven in the United States, which is very generous to the "victims of Communism." In Latin America, also, the mass murderers in states like Uruguay, Guatemala, and Argentina have been able to withdraw from power in favor of constrained democracies in which part of the deal, backed by continued army power, is insulation of the army from prosecution for major crimes.

Edward Herman's "DoubleSpeak" will appear monthly in Z,

